

## SHOULD I BELIEVE THE TRUTH by Daniel Whiting (2010)

In this paper D. Whiting defends the thesis that beliefs can be correct or incorrect from the arguments of Bykvist and Hattiangadi, proposing truth as the belief's correctness condition.

### *Belief as prescribing truth (the ought)*

W. elaborates the principle (1), expressing his main thesis: (1) For any  $p$ : the belief that  $p$  is correct if and only if it is true that  $p$ . B&H claim (1) to have a normative nature and clarify it thusly (2) For any  $S, p$ :  $S$  ought to believe that  $p$  if and only if it is true that  $p$ . This "ought", as they all support, can take a wide and narrow scope, W. focuses himself on the latter. This is formulated as (3) For any  $S, p$ :  $S$  ought to (believe that  $p$ ) if and only if it is true that  $p$ . B&H argue that this again can be reduced to two separate conditional statements. (3a) For any  $S, p$ : if it is true that  $p$ , then  $S$  ought to (believe that  $p$ ) and (3b) For any  $S, p$ : if  $S$  ought to (believe that  $p$ ), then it is true that  $p$ .

B&H assert that as regards to (3a) there are so many true propositions that a finite subject could not believe them all, and W. agrees that as long as ought implies can, the proposition is false. For (3b) on the other hand, B&H claim that if  $p$  is true, nothing proceeds about what  $S$  ought to believe. And if  $p$  is false, the only consequence is that it is not the case that  $S$  ought to believe that  $p$ . Hence, they maintain that (3b) cannot be characterized as normative. So as to defend themselves from the critiques of normativists, B&H entertain several possibilities to modify (2) but fail at discovering a valid one. W. opposes their view and declares (2) to be an incorrect understanding of (1), by defending and reinforcing its normative interpretation.

### *Correctness and permissibility*

W. starts his argumentation by asserting that not all normative matters regard what  $S$  "ought" to do, some regard what  $S$  "may" do. He defines this "may", as articulating what it is permissible to do, but nonetheless  $S$  is not obliged to do (It license and prohibits behavior but it does not mandate it).

The concept of may is not identical to the idea of being correct, W. declares. Yet, if  $p$  is correct, from a normative standpoint it follows that  $S$  may believe that  $p$ . While viceversa, if  $p$  is not correct,  $S$  ought not to believe that  $p$ . He concludes this first line of argument by stating that to say that  $p$  is correct, it generally signifies that it meets some standard and it is devoid of error. W. subsequently specifies that being correct has no direct relevance for what  $S$  ought to do. Finally, in order to rightly capture the normative relevance of (1), W. formulates (4) For any  $S, p$ :  $S$  may believe that  $p$  if and only if it is true that  $p$ .

### *Central argument about "may"*

Now W. analyzes independently whether (4) is true, despite its relation to (1). Firstly, he narrows his scope as he did before for present purposes and elaborates (5) For any  $S, p$ :  $S$  may (believe that  $p$ ) if and only if it is true that  $p$ . Which again, he contends, can be reduced further in (5a) For any  $S, p$ : if it is true that  $p$ , then  $S$  may (believe that  $p$ ); and (5b) For any  $S, p$ : if  $S$  may (believe that  $p$ ), then it is true that  $p$ . While it appear as these conditionals can be subjected to the same criticisms of (3), W. argues, that they do not actually undermine (5). He claims that (5a) does not mean that  $S$  may believe something which is not actually possible, on the opposite, what the proposition says, is that it is not the case that  $S$  ought not to believe it. Thusly, he clarifies (5a) as (5a\*) For any  $S, p$ : if it is true that  $p$ , then it is not the case that  $S$  ought not to (believe that  $p$ ). Continuing to comment the possible counterargument against (5b), he articulates that although it is true nothing follows from  $p$  being true, if  $p$  is not true on the opposite it follows that it is not the case that  $S$  may believe it (which he argues is the same as saying  $S$  ought not to believe it).

The author proceeds by addressing an additional rebuttal by B&H, namely (5) does not capture the idea of belief as aiming at the truth, a picture shared by several colleagues, but which W. characterizes as “hazy”. Despite the case that he does not advance the aforementioned image, yet believes its own comprehension, as providing a more clarified definition of belief. In fact, our author writes, those promoting the picture, do not discern between aiming to believe the truth and aiming to believe “only” the truth. He then finish his argument by stating that while the former is unattainable, the latter can be spelled out also as *aiming to avoid falsity*, hence claiming this to describe accurately (5).

### *The problem of logically unbelievable propositions (BS)*

Here W. attempts to respond to a different attack from B&H, that is, the problem of propositions logically, instead of psychologically impossible. He then starts by inspecting the following belief blindspot (BS) It is raining and nobody believes that it is raining. Clearly in this situation both (5a) and (5b) face contradiction and logical impossibility. W. confronts the incoherence by declaring that it would be misleading to characterize (5) as simultaneously may and may not believe. He adds that it is easy in front of (BS) to satisfy (5), i.e. by not believing the former proposition; he claims come from the fact that (5a) does not imposes requirements, differently from (5b) and hence they do not impose requirements that at the same time is impossible to refute.

Nonetheless, W. agrees there to be something still awaiting for an explanation, as regards to a permission which, when pursued makes  $S$  do something which is not permissible. Thus, he envisages a new principle restricted to only those propositions which can be believed truly. (6) For any  $S$ , believable truly  $p$ :  $S$  may (believe that  $p$ ) if and only if it is true that  $p$ . This restriction works as a device to exclude propositions such as (BS), from the realm of those W.’s own normative understanding of belief allow to be believed.

Despite this attempts, the author still entertains a possible objection. One highlighting that this new formulation, in spite of the fact of excluding (BS), it does not say what  $S$  ought to do when faced by a blindspot. He furthers his position by claiming that (6) is compatible with the view that belief is subject to supplementary norms, which may provide guidance to those cases. He continues by

asserting that believing (BS) involves something more than just falsity, it should not be addressed by a norm of truth; believing in it shows incoherence/irrationality, a “seriously alienated relationship with one’s beliefs”. Lastly, he shows how (BS) is a conjunction, whose conjuncts are both individually believably truly and only simultaneously do they result in a contradiction.

### *Discerning rational from irrational beliefs*

W. subsequently explores deeper the idea, as borrowed from Owens, of a standard governing beliefs, which sets a goal, i.e. the avoidance of falsity; so that it becomes possible to understand epistemic norms as providing instructions about how to reach the said goal. He then articulates the basic principles to discern rational from irrational beliefs. (E1) For any  $S, p$ : if  $S$  has (sufficient) evidence that it is not the case that  $p$ ,  $S$  may not believe that  $p$  (E2) For any  $S, p$ : if  $S$  has (sufficient) evidence that  $p$ ,  $S$  may believe that  $p$ . In this sense, a belief can very well be incorrect, but be rational and viceversa.  $S$  might believe correctly, but on the basis of poor evidence and hence irrationally.

While examining the problem of truth W. asserts that the attitude of believing a proposition is made correct by the proposition being true. It is the property of  $p$  allowing  $S$  to believe it. And he proclaims, it is acceptable that while correctness is a normative or evaluative notion, truth by itself is not.

### *Final assessment*

The provocative title captures very well W.’s normativist thesis; it is not necessary for us to believe everything that is true, but it is not permissible to us to believe what is false. So, the standards of belief must be understood at aiming to avoid falsity, instead of aiming to know all the possible truths (which are theoretically infinite and naturally impossible to believe). We should not believe what is false, but we are not required to consider all possible true propositions; although all possible true propositions, each individually because of it being true, it is permissible for us to be believed (even when impossible). W.’s normativism requires us simply to refuse whatever belief it is shown to be false, but there is no standard to mandate us to believe a certain true proposition. In this sense, W. thesis, it has a negative nature. It does not mandate what to believe, but what to believe not. Which obviously can create additional problems, although preventing others. It is still wanting and needy of a further narrowing. As I could believe truths which are random, or arbitrarily put together or which are not pregnant to a specific context or field of inquiry.

While, as regards to his view of rationality, a significant problem is constituted by the definition of “sufficient evidence”. What is the criterion to determine when the collection of evidence reaches the point, to which it becomes “sufficient” and hence the belief is rational and justified? Instead of focusing (only) on qualifying evidence as sufficient, we could aim at determine also, whether it is good or bad evidence. We could attempt to define sufficient as an evaluative concept on the extension of  $S$  research, while also introducing an additional evaluative concept such as good/bad, hence about the quality of the research itself (i.e. assessing the methodology of the research).

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